

THE INITIATIVE OF GOD AND THE GALATIAN OUTREACH
ACTS 13:13-25

INTRODUCTION AND REVIEW

Although the US Supreme Court is now on summer recess, there is probably as much public interest in decisions of the high court as there ever has been. In this recent term significant rulings included decisions that the president has certain immunity from criminal prosecution, that states can prohibit gender transitioning treatment for minors, and that federal courts cannot freely issue nationwide injunctions. Still pending is the issue of whether anyone born in the US is automatically a US citizen.

(PROJECTOR ON--- CONSTITUTIONAL CONVENTION) In the summer of 1787 the constitutional convention meeting in Philadelphia was struggling to make progress in the adoption of a constitution for the nation's government. After several weeks of little or no progress eighty-one-year-old Benjamin Franklin (BENJAMIN FRANKLIN) rose to address the convention. He said, **"In the beginning of the contest with Britain, when we were sensible of danger, we had daily prayers in this room for Divine protection. Our prayers, Sir, were heard and they were graciously answered. All of us who were engaged in the struggle must have observed frequent instances of a superintending Providence in our favor... Have we now forgotten this powerful Friend? Or do we imagine we no longer need His assistance?"**

"I have lived, Sir, a long time, and the longer I live, the more convincing proofs I see of this truth: that God governs in the affairs of man. And if a sparrow cannot fall to the ground without His notice, is it probable that an empire can rise without His aid? We have been assured, Sir, in the Sacred Writings that except the Lord build the house, they labor in vain that build it. I firmly believe this..."

"I therefore beg leave to move that, henceforth, prayers imploring the assistance of Heaven and its blessing on our deliberation be held in this assembly every morning."

Benjamin Franklin had an obvious belief in God, but he did not claim to be a Christian. Yet even he recognized the sovereign hand of God in the formation of our nation. As Christians we can give a hearty "amen" to that. Probably all of us could agree that it was God who sovereignly put our country together. (PROJECTOR OFF)

Yet when we speak of the initiative of God in other areas of life, we often have difficulty. When we speak of election or predestination--- both Biblical terms--- we may react negatively. When we consider the sovereignty of God in relationship to trials and tribulations and death and suffering, we may not be so quick to give a hearty "amen" to the notion that God is truly at work.

The passage before us this morning deals with the sovereignty of God in relationship to a number of areas of life. As we look at the divine initiative in the expansion of the gospel outside of Israel, we are going to see how the initiative of God should be regarded as a cause for comfort and not a cause for difficulty.

I.

Let's begin then in v. 13 of Acts #13 and a consideration of THE DIVINE INITIATIVE IN PAUL'S LEADERSHIP. (PROJECTOR ON--- I. THE DIVINE INITIATIVE IN PAUL'S LEADERSHIP) We looked last time at the beginning of the first Christian missionary trip outside of the Middle East. We saw earlier that when Jewish Christians came to Antioch and began preaching about Christ, a number of Gentiles who had some level of involvement with the synagogue responded. So a church comprised of both Jews and Gentiles was established. (FIRST MISSIONARY JOURNEY) Then the Holy Spirit directed, perhaps through prophets in the church, that Paul and Barnabas should be sent out as missionaries. Last time we saw them come to Cyprus. They preached in the two biggest cities there. In spite of the opposition of a Jewish false prophet and magician, the Roman governor was among those who responded to the gospel.

In v. 13, then, the author Luke tells us, **“Now Paul and his companions set sail from Paphos and came to Perga in Pamphylia. And John left them and returned to Jerusalem...”** (PERGA) No specific reason is stated for making this region the next stop for the missionary team. But geographically we might regard it as a logical next stop in a progression that was to reach generally westward toward Rome. There were no passenger ships. Paul and Barnabas and John Mark would have needed to buy passage on a commercial ship headed in that direction.

Perga was seven miles up the river from the coast. The missionaries would have walked or taken a small boat up the river to Perga. The Christians apparently didn't stay very long there. What is noted is that John Mark left them. I pointed out last time that John Mark was a young cousin of Barnabas. (PROJECTOR OFF) This future writer of the gospel account that bears his name was an eyewitness of some of the events surrounding the death and resurrection of Jesus. At Perga he decided to go back home to Jerusalem. Later on we will see that this departure becomes a source of contention between Paul and Barnabas.

The main thing that I want you to notice is the change in leadership. As I pointed out last time, the two Christian leaders had previously been referred to in the Book of Acts as “Barnabas and Saul.” Now Luke describes them as “Paul and his companions.” From the account that follows it becomes clear that Paul begins to act as the leader of this team. Barnabas had been the one who had taken Paul under his wing when he first came to Jerusalem. A couple years later it was Barnabas who went to Paul's hometown to find Paul and bring him to Antioch to help in the ministry there. Now Paul begins to act as the leader.

How do you suppose Barnabas felt about that? Did you ever experience anything like that at work or at school where someone lower on the totem pole overtook your

position? I must confess that occasionally when I have found out that a classmate from seminary has written a book that is selling well or is pastoring a large church, I have had the thought pass through my mind: "How did that guy who wasn't a very good student pull that off?"

But there is no hint of such self-centered feelings here. Why? Two things. **First**, Barnabas was a godly man. He was a mature Christian. He wanted to do what was right and pleasing to God more than what might be personally advantageous. **Second**, he saw the divine initiative in Paul's move to leadership. Barnabas knew about the unique circumstances of Paul's conversion. He knew that God had sovereignly declared Paul to be an apostle of Christ and to take the lead in bringing the gospel to the Gentile world. He saw what was happening as the sovereign work of God.

It is this kind of understanding that is so important to the maintenance of unity in the body of Christ. We need to recognize that it is Christ who is the head of the church and that it is, or should be, He who is establishing people in positions of leadership and responsibility and giving out spiritual gifts through the Holy Spirit. So if we trust in the sovereignty of God, we can be confident that He has a plan for our lives, that He will use us if we are faithful, and that He will use others according to their gifts and calling.

II.

(PROJECTOR ON--- II. THE DIVINE INITIATIVE IN THE...) In vv. 14-16, then, we come to THE DIVINE INITIATIVE IN THE TRIP TO ANTIOCH. Verse 14 tells us, **"...but they went on from Perga and came to Antioch in Pisidia. And on the Sabbath day they went into the synagogue and sat down."** (PERGA TO ANTIOCH) This Antioch was 100 miles north of Perga at an elevation of 3600 feet above sea level. It was a Roman colony, which meant that it enjoyed a special legal status and was inhabited originally by retired members of the Roman army.

This is the second town named Antioch that we have encountered in our study of Acts. (PISIDIAN ANTIOCH) In an earlier message I pointed out that there was a Greek ruler of this entire region several centuries earlier who named Antioch in Syria after his father and son who were named Antiochus. Greek general Seleucus actually named sixteen towns in his large realm "Antioch." This Antioch was in the Roman province of Galatia and was known as Pisidian Antioch because it was near the region of Pisidia.

Luke does not indicate why the missionaries chose to go here to Pisidian Antioch. But there is a reference to this decision in the New Testament Book of Galatians, which Paul later wrote. (GALATIANS 4:13) In Galatians #4 vv. 13 & 14 he tells the Christians of this region, **"You know it was because of a bodily ailment that I preached the gospel to you at first, (GALATIANS 4:14) and though my condition was a trial to you, you did not scorn or despise me, but received me as an angel of God, as Christ Jesus."**

What this illness was we are not told. But the fact that the route from Perga to Antioch was difficult has led some scholars to conclude that Paul must have been suffering from

malaria. The warm, muggy climate near the Mediterranean coast was not conducive to recovery from a malarial attack. But the cooler, drier atmosphere of Antioch was regarded as being better for a malaria victim. This might explain why Paul would endure a difficult trip while suffering from physical illness. (PROJECTOR OFF)

Whatever the physical illness was, it is clear from Paul's comment in Galatians that it was the reason that the missionaries preached there. It wasn't originally part of their plan. But it was God's plan. The preaching in Galatia was due to the divine initiative. This illness was not a pleasant thing for Paul. The guy clearly was not feeling well. Yet it was part of the plan of God. The end result was that a number of Galatians became followers of Jesus, and the letter later written to them by the Apostle Paul became part of the New Testament.

The encouragement to us is that, since we have a sovereign God, we can be confident that the health problems and financial reversals and job difficulties and deaths and persecution can and do serve a purpose. They are not without meaning. They are part of a divine plan. (PROJECTOR ON--- ROMANS 8:28) Romans 8:28 says, **"And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose."** The "all things" must include what we would regard as bad things as well as good things.

I would not naturally have chosen to move to Nevada. My roots are in the Midwest. Suzy's roots were in New England. But Suzy and Bart had chronic health problems, and a couple of doctors encouraged us to move to a warmer and drier climate. As with Paul, health problems were a key factor in directing us to a place of ministry. I have no doubt that this can be attributed to the divine initiative.

Verses 14-16 describe the opportunity that came to preach at the synagogue in Pisidian Antioch (PISIDIAN ANTIOCH), [the remains of which are seen here]. We learn something from these verses about the style of worship that was observed in synagogues outside of Israel. Other writings tell us that there was first a call to worship and then a series of prescribed prayers. We see here that there was then a reading from the Law and then one from the Prophets. Typically this was followed by some kind of message and then the benediction. Many of the elements of our Christian worship can be traced back to this method of Jewish worship. (PROJECTOR OFF)

The ruler, or rulers, of the synagogue typically asked a gifted member of the congregation to explain the meaning of the passages of Scripture that had been read. In Luke #4, which records an incident that happened in the synagogue at Nazareth, Jesus did just that. The Scripture from the Prophets came from Isaiah #61. Jesus gave a short talk about this Messianic passage, and then said, **"Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."** That blew His listeners away. They went out and tried to kill Him for blasphemy.

In our story Paul was asked to give a word of exhortation. That terminology suggests that they weren't necessarily expecting an exposition of the Scripture readings for the

day. Paul must have had the chance to talk with the synagogue officials earlier. If they did not know about Paul, they certainly knew about his teacher Gamaliel, who was the most famous rabbi in the world of Judaism. So it was only natural that this rabbi Paul be asked to say something at that Sabbath service. Perhaps by asking for a word of exhortation they were giving him more latitude in his choice of subject matter. The place of ministry and the opportunity for ministry were the result of the divine initiative.

III.

In v. 16 Paul begins to give his word of exhortation. In vv. 16-22 he describes THE DIVINE INITIATIVE IN THE CALLING AND PRESERVING OF ISRAEL. (PROJECTOR ON--- III. THE DIVINE INITIATIVE...) This is the longest sermon of Paul that we have recorded in the New Testament. It is similar in structure to the sermon of Stephen described in #7. It seems to have been a typical preaching style for many of the rabbis of that day to appeal to Israel's Biblical history to construct an argument or a message addressed to the congregation. Paul is intending to use this historical argumentation to point people toward the acceptance of Jesus as the Messiah.

He addresses his listeners as “**Men of Israel, and you who fear God.**” The second term referred to Gentiles who were not full converts to Judaism. They worshiped at the synagogue and had varying degrees of spiritual commitment and belief in the God of Israel.

At a synagogue 100 miles west of Antioch archaeologists discovered a nine foot pillar that contained a list of 125 names of people who contributed to that synagogue. The scholars determined that 54 of the 125 were God-fearers--- Gentiles who were not fully converted to Judaism. (*Biblical Archaeology Review*, Nov./Dec. 2013, p. 55) So there may have been a significant number of Gentiles as well as Jews who were listening to Paul in the Pisidian synagogue.

Notice how Paul begins his message in v. 17: “**The God of this people Israel chose our fathers...**” (REPEAT) Keep in mind that this was the first message that these people had ever heard from Paul. The apostle is setting out to make an evangelistic appeal. The first doctrine to which he makes reference is God's sovereign choice. This has to do with predestination and election and stuff that is today often called Calvinism. How could an apostle of God make a tactical blunder by raising such a controversial issue right at the beginning of his message?

Apparently he didn't get thrown out of the place for mentioning it. In fact at the end of his message in v. 42 Luke tells us, “**...the people begged that these things might be told them the next Sabbath.**” Clearly this doctrine was not as unsettling to them as it often is in many of our churches.

Some today might argue that his listeners didn't get upset because they understood that Paul meant that God had chosen to bless Israel because their people were more deserving than anyone else. But that not only weakens the force of the language that Paul uses, it is also inconsistent with the Biblical record. (DEUTERONOMY 7:6) In

Deuteronomy #7 vv. 6-8 Moses told his people, **“For you are a people holy to the Lord your God. The Lord your God has chosen you to be a people for his treasured possession, out of all the peoples who are on the face of the earth. (DEUTERONOMY 7:7) It was not because you were more in number than any other people that the Lord set his love on you and chose you, for you were the fewest of all peoples, (DEUTERONOMY 7:8) but it is because the Lord loves you and is keeping the oath that he swore to your fathers, that the Lord has brought you out with a mighty hand and redeemed you from the house of slavery...”**

OK. So the Lord blessed Israel because of promises that He had made to their forefathers. No doubt they were deserving of God's blessing and had made wise decisions to follow Him. Thus God's choice to bless Israel, right?

(JOSHUA 24:2) Listen to Joshua #24 vv. 2 & 3: **“And Joshua said to all the people, ‘Thus says the Lord, the God of Israel, “Long ago, your fathers lived beyond the Euphrates, Terah, the father of Abraham and of Nahor; and they served other gods. (JOSHUA 24:3) Then I took your father Abraham from beyond the River and led him through all the land of Canaan...”’”** These people were not more deserving than anyone else. They didn't even worship the God of the Bible. They were all polytheists. The initiative was with God. It was His choice to bless this family and their descendants, and it is the same with us. It is God who takes the initiative in bringing us to Himself. It is not because we are more spiritual or more deserving or more perceptive than someone else. It is because God graciously calls us and pulls us to Christ. (PROJECTOR OFF)

Paul goes on to remind his listeners about God's deliverance of the nation from Egypt. He makes reference in v. 18 to God's provision for them during the forty years of wandering in the wilderness. You might notice that there is a little footnote in some of your Bibles by the words “put up with.” Some early manuscripts have a slightly different word which means “sustained.” I am inclined to think that it is the correct word, which would mean that Paul is saying that God sustained the Israelites in the wilderness for forty years rather than simply put up with them.

The exact time reference in v. 19 is a bit uncertain. Most commentators take Paul to be referring to the four hundred years of slavery in Egypt plus the forty years of wandering in the wilderness plus an additional ten years which it took for Israel to occupy the land. Then came the judges. Then came Samuel the prophet. Then came the first king of Israel, Saul Paul's namesake, King Saul.

In a passage that focuses on the initiative of God it is noteworthy that Paul points out that the people asked for a king. It was not the Lord who took the initiative in giving Israel a human king. Thus Israel suffered because the people got a bad king. But all things are part of God's sovereign plan, and the king that followed Saul was a man after God's own heart. It was David. In v. 22 Paul points out that it was God who raised him up. He was a man after God's own heart because he was committed to doing His will.

The Lord took the initiative in calling Israel, and He takes the initiative in calling us. The thing which marks out the man or woman of God is that he or she responds positively to the divine initiative. He seeks to do what is the revealed will of God. Although God is the initiator, human beings have choices, and we are accountable for the choices that we make.

IV.

In vv. 23-25 then we come to THE DIVINE INITIATIVE IN THE PROVISION OF JESUS. (PROJECTOR ON--- THE DIVINE INITIATIVE...) It was the divine initiative that was responsible for the provision of Jesus to be the Savior for mankind's sins. Paul says in v. 23, **"Of this man's offspring [David] God has brought to Israel a Savior, Jesus, as he promised."**

In most of our colleges teachers portray Jesus as a teacher who made various claims for Himself, though they disagree among themselves about just who He thought He was. If we take the Bible seriously, we can't help but come to the conclusion that it portrays Jesus as one who was sent by divine initiative. Paul here makes reference to a promise that was made by the Lord to David. (2 SAMUEL 7:12) In 2 Samuel #7 vv. 12 & 13 David was told, **"When your days are fulfilled and you lie down with your fathers, I will raise up your offspring after you, who shall come from your body, and I will establish his kingdom. (2 SAMUEL 7:13) He shall build a house for my name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever.."**

The New Testament stresses in several places that Jesus was not a self-appointed holy man who somehow got in touch with His inner feelings or spirituality. (JOHN 3:16) The Bible says, **"For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life."** Paul later wrote these Galatians (GALATIANS 4:4), saying, **"But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, (GALATIANS 4:5) to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons."** The provision of Jesus was the result of the divine initiative.

To support this notion Paul adds that there was a forerunner who came before Jesus to prepare His way and to fulfill Old Testament prophecy. This was John the Baptist. (MALACHI 3:1) In #3 v. 1 of the last book of the Hebrew Bible, Malachi, the Lord said, **"Behold, I send my messenger, and he will prepare the way before me. And the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple; and the messenger of the covenant in whom you delight, behold, he is coming, says the Lord of hosts."** The God-sent Savior was preceded by a God-sent forerunner.

The divine initiative is apparent throughout this passage. It was God who sovereignly appointed Paul to be leader of this outreach to the Gentiles. It was God who was at work in the midst of Paul's illness to see that the gospel outreach came to Antioch. As Paul recognized in his sermon at the synagogue in Antioch, it was God who called and sustained the people of Israel throughout their history. It was God who provided Jesus to be a Savior for not only the Jews but also Gentiles who would place their faith in Him.

V.

So let's consider finally THE DIVINE INITIATIVE AND ITS VALUE TO US. (V. THE DIVINE INITIATIVE AND...) Just as Paul stressed the divine initiative in the calling and sustaining of Israel, so also the New Testament stresses the divine initiative in calling and sustaining the followers of Jesus. (EPHESIANS 1:3) At the beginning of the Book of Ephesians Paul says, **"Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, (EPHESIANS 1:4) even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him. In love (EPHESIANS 1:5) he predestined us for adoption to himself as sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will..."**

At the beginning of Paul's First Epistle to the Thessalonians the apostle gives thanks for the Christians in that Greek city. (1 THESSALONIANS 1:3-4) He says that he remembers **"your work of faith and labor of love."** He adds, **"For we know brothers loved by God that he has chosen you..."**

In Peter's First Epistle he addresses those who are chosen by God. (1 PETER 1:3) He says, **"Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! According to his great mercy, he has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, (1 PETER 1:4) to an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you, (1 PETER 1:5) who by God's power are being guarded through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time."**

It is the sovereign God who takes the initiative in providing for our salvation, in bringing us to Himself, in sustaining us, in giving us talents and spiritual gifts and using even our trials and tribulations to accomplish His purposes. We Christians sometimes treat the sovereignty of God as a problem, especially in regard to his direction of our lives and His election, or predetermination, of us to eternal life. Yet the initiative of God in our lives is designed for our good. Properly understood it should be a cause for our encouragement. There are several reasons why this is so. (PROJECTOR OFF)

First, God's sovereignty in our salvation should give us a sense of security. If our eternal life is primarily dependent on our decisions or our behavior or our faith, we have reason for concern and insecurity. But if our relationship with God is primarily dependent upon His choice of us and His calling us to Himself, and His work in our lives, then we have reason to feel secure in Him. (PROJECTOR ON--- JOHN 6:39) In John 6:39-40 Jesus said, **"And this is the will of him who sent me, that I should lose nothing of all that he has given me, but raise it up on the last day. (JOHN 6:40) For this is the will of my Father, that everyone who looks on the Son and believes in him should have eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day."**

Theologian Loraine Boettner says, **"The sense of security which this doctrine gives to the struggling saint results from the assurance that he is not committed to his**

own power, or rather weakness, but into the sure hands of the Almighty Father,--- that over him is the banner of love and underneath are the everlasting arms.” (*The Reformed Doctrine of Predestination*, p. 329) (PROJECTOR OFF)

A **second** value that the doctrine of God’s sovereignty has for us is that it assures us that our trials and tribulations are not without purpose. Even the apostle of Christ was subject to sickness. Paul had other problems in his life. But as we see from our lesson today his health difficulties served a purpose. People became followers of Jesus because of his personal trials. In a similar way we can be confident that the trials and tribulations that we face are part of God’s sovereign plan and also serve a purpose. “All things do work together for good to those who love God.” The challenge to us in the midst of these trials is to maintain the faith. Keep trusting in Jesus.

The **third** value that comes from trusting in the doctrine of God’s sovereignty is that it helps us to have a better attitude toward the spiritually lost. If our status as Christians, as members of the family of God, is due partly to our perceptiveness, our character, our merit, or our deservedness, then we have reason for boasting. We have reason for pride. But if we are at root just as sinful as anyone else, then we have no reason to look down on anyone else. If we believe that our salvation is based upon the grace of God and the choice of God made apart from any merit in us, then we ought to be able to have a kinder, gentler attitude toward those who are not Christians. We should have more compassion for them, and we should be more patient toward them.

Then, **fourth**, a proper understanding of the sovereignty of God can improve our worship. If we slide into thinking that we are pretty hot stuff in the Christian life because of our commitment, because of our discipline in studying the Bible, because of our good deeds, because of the many things that we do in church, because of the length of time that we have been Christians, then it is going to be difficult to worship God in an effective way. But if we come to recognize and truly believe that our salvation is a gracious gift from God, that our gifts and talents come from God and that our trials and tribulations as well as our deliverances are part of His plan, we are going to be in a better position to worship God in the way that He deserves to be worshipped.

(PROJECTOR ON--- ROMANS 11:33) As the Apostle Paul wrote in Romans #11, **“Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways! (ROMANS 11:34-35) For who has known the mind of the Lord,/ or who has been his counselor?/ Or who has given a gift to him/ that he might be repaid?/ (ROMANS 11:36) For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever. Amen..”**